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### Deposited in DRO:

05 March 2010

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Rigg, J. (2009) 'Grand narrative or modest comparison ? reflecting on the 'lessons' of East Asian development and growth.', Singapore journal of tropical geography., 30 (1). pp. 29-34.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9493.2008.00353.x>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

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## Grand narrative or modest comparison? Reflecting on the ‘lessons’ of East Asian development and growth

Jonathan Rigg

‘Geography does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme’ (With apologies to Mark Twain)

Development geographers are interested in the spatial patterning of temporal change. This apparently straight-forward statement, however, hides a multitude of possible periodicities and temporal scales on the one hand, and spatial units and geographical scales on the other (Table 1). The outcome is that we should expect difference not just between continents, but also through time and variously at different scales (see also Bebbington, Klak, and Mohan and Power in this forum). This does not mean that we should shy away from looking for common experiences, shared lessons, and rhyming patterns (geographies) and periodicities (histories).

**Table 1: Scales and periodicities in development geography**

	<b>Scales and periodicities</b>	<b>Objects and contexts</b>
<b>Spatial patterning</b>	Continental	Development status, incomes, poverty, structure of the economy, livelihoods, levels of social and economic integration, migration and mobility, diversification, hybrid spaces, spatial communities...
	National	
	Regional	
	Village/community	
	Household	
	Individual	
<b>Temporal change</b>	Histories	Development trajectories, production and reproduction of poverty, structural change, trends in well-being and livelihoods, gender relations and transformations, quality of life, human-environment relations, generational changes, panel studies, livelihood dynamics...
	Eras	
	Generations	
	Life courses	
	Narratives	

This short piece approaches the debate over East Asian development in three ways. First, it considers the dangers of country and region-level generalisations; second, it shows how certain views and pronouncements about East Asia’s growth have been recycled in different guises and contexts for approaching half a century; and third, it argues that the most productive avenue for comparison is by focusing on development ‘themes’, rather than on the grand narrative.

In seeking out the rhymes of development, country-level comparisons are both the most seductive and, in some regards, the most futile in their attempt to distil a complex and variegated process – development – into a singular set of lessons or issues. Nonetheless, the tyranny of the nation state, of country league tables, of national development projects and programmes, and of the ordering of the world leads us inexorably to make comparisons between countries and, sometimes, between continents. Nowhere, possibly, has this tendency been greater than in the comparisons that have been drawn between the development experience of East Asia – widely seen

to be positive – and the rest of the developing world. This search for lessons can be traced back at least to the 1960s

Myint, in an early and influential paper (Myint 1967), used the experience of Asia to recommend an ‘outward-looking’ development strategy involving the promotion of exports and support for foreign investors and domestic entrepreneurs.<sup>1</sup> Yamazawa (1992) also emphasised the benefits of an outward-looking strategy, but highlighted the importance of regional cooperation and interdependence over global economic integration in Asia’s growth, writing of a ‘flying geese pattern’ of industrial development.<sup>2</sup> Critical to this industrial transfer was the maintenance of a policy environment favourable to free(ish) trade, conducive to foreign direct investment and, in broad terms, outward-looking in orientation. The study with the highest profile, however, was the World Bank’s (1993) attempt to distil the ‘essence’ of the East Asian miracle into a set of policy prescriptions from which other countries might learn. While this study was quickly criticised for its failure adequately to acknowledge and record the role of the state in stage managing Asia’s growth (Amsden 1994, Huff 1995, Leftwich 1995, Perkins 1994), the market-led global integration paradigm remained – and remains – powerful and influential.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, the Commission on Growth and Development (CGD 2008) has set out to identify ‘strategies for sustained growth and inclusive development’, based on 13 ‘success stories’, of which nine are East Asian.<sup>4</sup> Like the World Bank’s report 15 years earlier, the Commission sets out to identify the ‘right mix of ingredients’ for growth, of which taking advantage of opportunities in the global economy (integration) and creating the incentives and investments for private investment, are central.

In summary, the big issues that have shaped the macro-development debate in East Asia over the last half century have revolved around six questions, which have been (re-)circulated rather than transformed over that period:

1. How important has global economic integration (‘openness’), reflected in flows of FDI, been to Asia’s economic and developmental success?
2. What roles have the state (‘developmental states’) and ‘good governance’ (and, during the Asian economic crisis, ‘crony capitalism’) played in Asia’s model of growth, and by association what is the role of the market?
3. How important have interactions and inter-dependencies at the regional level been in shaping development and forging growth?
4. What have been the roles of culture and society (‘Asian values’, the ‘Asian way’) in explaining Asia’s economic vitality?

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<sup>1</sup> Myint (1967) categorised Burma and Indonesia as ‘inward-looking’ countries, and the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia as ‘outward-looking’.

<sup>2</sup> This metaphor was first used by Kaname Akamatsu in the mid-1930s, in a Japanese language publication. He later developed the theme in English language papers (Akamatsu 1962: 3 and 11).

<sup>3</sup> These criticisms were not new, but drew on a number of earlier publications: .e.g Johnson 1982, Wade 1990 and Amsden 1989.

<sup>4</sup> The others are: Botswana, Brazil, Malta and Oman.

5. Can we view Asia as an exemplar of development success ('good' change, pro-poor growth), as well as a paragon of economic prowess?
6. Was Asia simply in the right place at the right time (the historical 'moment' argument)?

The debate over what has made (parts of) Asia so economically successful is important, but ultimately we take away from the discussion barely more than we arrived with: geography matters; culture and society matter; policies and the quality of government matter; and the opportunities afforded by history matter. The CGD report shows the contortions needed to tread the line between specifying and generalising:

"The report identifies some of the distinctive characteristics of high-growth economies and asks how other developing countries can emulate them. It does not provide a formula for policy makers to apply – no generic formula exists. Each country has specific characteristics and historical experiences that must be reflected in its growth strategy. But the report does offer a framework that should help policy makers create a growth strategy of their own" (2008: 2).

The more constructive – but possibly less entertaining – entrée into the debate is offered at the sub-national level and in thematic discussions within the wider ambit of development. Nested within the wider question of whether Asia is an example of 'modernisation without development' (question 5, above), for example, lies a series of research themes that offer more purchase than the grand meta-narratives of economic transformation when it comes to comparison (Table 2). There has, thus, been a rich debate about how to define 'pro-poor growth', whether it has been achieved – or not – in different countries, why these differences exist, and what policy lessons can be drawn (see Ravallion and Chen 2003 and 2007, Kraay 2006, Ravallion and Datt 2002, Zepeda 2004, Lopez 2004). At the same time, the related issue of quality of life and notions of well-being has been instructively explored between countries to understand why 'improving' measures of income-poverty may be accompanied by a fall in well-being (see <http://www.bath.ac.uk/econ-dev/wellbeing/>).

**Table 2: Themes that underlie the grand narratives**

	<b>Regional</b>	<b>Community/household</b>
5. Can we view Asia as an exemplar of development success ('good' change), as well as a paragon of economic prowess?	Pro-poor growth and it's achievement	Panel studies tracking trajectories of change over time
	Urban bias	Quality of life and well-being
	Regional inequalities	Gender and generational inequalities
	Rural/urban inequalities	Sustainable livelihoods
	Sustainable development	Risk, vulnerability and resilience
	Inter-personal inequality (national and regional)	Inter-personal inequality (local)
		Social capital

‘Deagrarianisation’ is a good example of how a theme that may have first been developed in one country or continent has been exported to other contexts, and been adapted, extended and/or challenged in various ways. Bryceson coined the term in the 1990s to describe a “long-term process of occupational adjustment, income earning reorientation, social identification and spatial relocation of rural dwellers [in Africa] away from strictly agricultural-based modes of livelihood” (2002: 726, and see Bryceson 1996, 1997). I then used the term in the context of rural change in mainland Southeast Asia (Rigg 2001, Rigg and Nattapoolwat 2001), adding a further defining characteristic – spatial interpenetration – to take account of the scope for intense spatial interactions and higher degrees of mobility. Potter and Badcock (2004, 2007) working with tree crop small holders in Indonesia, noted the shaping role of *adat* (traditional forms of land tenure) in preventing the full emergence of a deagrarianised rural landscape while Francks (2006), in Japan, has seen the persistence of the small-scale, pluriactive rural household not as indicative of relict peasant tendencies but as a creative response to the changing conditions brought about by deep industrialisation. Steward (2007) has also found traction in the use of the term in the Amazon, but highlights the long historical roots of pluriactivity and the role of decentralisation policies in Brazil in driving rural incomes and employment diversification (see also Bebbington in this forum). In Africa, meanwhile, scholars like Yaro (2006) in northern Ghana, have challenged the premise of the deagrarianisation thesis, identifying more scope for intensification within the farm sector and rather less for non-farm diversification due to the marginalisation of the poor peasantry and their lack of resources and market links. Both he and Parnwell (2007) note the ‘reversibility’ of trends and the possibilities for re-agrarianisation and re-peasantisation (see also Fold in this forum).

Interpretations of the grand narratives of development, transformation and change are invariably the most appealing, particularly to policy-makers. As this piece has argued, however, to dissemble the grand national and regional narratives into bite sized ‘hot tips’ is difficult, and if taken too far can create a tendency towards development and development planning ‘by design’. That said, high level discussions remain important, not least because they can sometimes galvanise debate. One can point, for example, to Gunnar Myrdal’s *Asian drama* (1968), the World Bank’s *East Asian miracle* (1993) and, more latterly, Paul Collier’s *The bottom billion* (2007) and Jeffrey Sachs’ *Common wealth* (2008).

There are, however, ways of dealing with the problematic tendency towards reductionism and simplification (see also Folds in this forum). First it is possible to ask why countries with apparently similar policy and planning environments have such varied experiences (outcomes) or, alternatively, why those with different environments have similar experiences of development. These questions require that, having stripped the bones clean of context, it is reapplied to make the geographical, historical and social contingency of development clear. In this way, the ambition of the grand narrative is allied to and tempered by the necessity to test and validate such ambition. The second approach is to embark on the task of comparison and cross-continental inter-change and learning through the interrogation of more modest sub-themes such as deagrarianisation, the role of social capital, or notions of well-being. It is in these areas where we are more likely to make fruitful cross-continental comparisons (still all too rare), and more likely to discern Mark Twain’s rhyming.

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